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ABSTRACT

Rural school consolidation in Iowa in the early 20th century was not simply an attempt at educational reform, but was also an attempt to transform the rural social geography of the region. Since consolidation of corporate power had resulted in economic progress in the cities, it was thought that re-centering rural life around country towns could help diffuse that progress to rural areas. The consolidated school would introduce methods of scientific agriculture and modern business practices and would prepare farm children for the urban industrial jobs that many of them would fill as the number of farmers dwindled. School consolidation in Iowa during this period failed because rural Iowans felt that the loss of a country school ensured the demise of the rural neighborhood and that consolidation simply delivered education in a different, not necessarily better, manner. This is relevant to today's situation in that to obtain the necessary public support and be successful educationally, programs in gifted education should help forge a re-connection between rural schools and the place-based communities they serve. Opportunities should be provided for gifted students to exercise their talents in ways that integrate them into their home communities. Even in the age of telecommunications, the concept of school as a place where people learn about themselves in relation to their community retains its relevance. In seeking ways of serving gifted students, the kind of place the rural school is and what kind of place it could become should be rethought. (TD)

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RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY IOWA: LESSONS FOR THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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RURAL SCHOOL CONSOLIDATION IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY IOWA: LESSONS FOR THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

I am sure all of you are familiar with rural school consolidation as an educational innovation and how the movement was first given impetus in 1897 with the publication of the report of the so-called Committee of Twelve commissioned by the National Education Association and chaired by Iowa's then Superintendent of Public Instruction, Henry Sabin. Although Sabin was subsequently far less sanguine about the prospects of consolidation for improving the quality of rural education, his committee's report legitimated efforts within the fledgling education profession to solve the so-called "rural school problem" by closing the smallest, presumably inefficient, country schools and consolidating students and teachers in a smaller number of centrally located schools. The rural school problem supposedly consisted of a litany of educational sins of omission and commission. Teachers were inexperienced, poorly trained and underpaid, unsupervised, their tenure was too short, and their teaching methods dated. Schools were too small and un-standardized to permit the subdivision of students into meaningful grades thought necessary for converting education from a cooperative to a competitive endeavor. **But most of all, rural schools were criticized for being so different from urban schools that they simply had to be inferior in terms of quality.**

The story I wish to share with you today is less well known. It is one I spent almost a decade in researching for my book, *There Goes the Neighborhood.* It examines rural school consolidation in the Midwest, and Iowa more specifically, in the first quarter of the twentieth century, not simply as an educational reform, but also **as an attempt to transform the rural social geography of the region.** In the period between 1897 and 1910, educational reformers had failed repeatedly to convince their state legislatures of the need to abolish rural school districts and reconstitute them on a larger territorial scale. Faced with these failures reformers realized that any form of rural school consolidation would need to be implemented locally and subjected to local voter approval. To succeed they somehow needed to convince rural people to abandon their schools voluntarily and to cede more discretion to professional educators through state regulation. This would prove to be a difficult task.

Most rural Midwesterners took great pride in their country schools. The country school was not only the place where formal education occurred, it was almost invariably the only public property a rural neighborhood possessed and served as a powerful reminder of the social cooperation necessary for family farming to remain viable socially and economically. While reformers' description of the rural school problem may have been a more accurate description of rural schooling in the East and South, most farm families in the Midwest did not perceive their schools to be in crisis, and, at least for Iowa, the historical evidence suggests that the farmers were right. The educational reformers' solution was to form a de facto alliance with activists in the County Life movement, which in 1909 achieved national prominence with the appointment of the Country Life Commission by President Theodore Roosevelt. I'll return to a discussion of the Country Life movement in a moment, but first I need to describe the economic and cultural significance of the rural neighborhood

in the Midwest at the turn of the twentieth century.

RURAL NEIGHBORHOOD, PLACE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Until recently most historians and geographers failed to probe very deeply into the nature of the social relations, rural institutions, and culture that characterized midwestern family farming throughout most of its history. Clinging to European conceptions, they looked for community in towns and villages rather than in the countryside. The traditional conception of community was assumed to require regular, face-to-face interaction in tight-knit, family-based communities. This in turn presumably mandated a village-centered pattern of rural settlement; not the dispersed farmsteads in the open country that characterized the Midwest. They were wrong.

Forms of community based on the open-country, rural neighborhood persisted in the Midwest because the family farming practiced there required them for its survival.[1] Economically, family farming is something of a misnomer because it relied upon the labor of family members **and** neighbors. Although farm families produced commodities for the market, they also needed to produce a wide variety of goods that could be used directly on the farm or by the family or could be exchanged with neighbors in non-market transactions. The rural neighborhood, consisting of all farm families within a territory of only a few square miles usually focused on a country school or church, provided farm families with the vital safety net they needed to survive during hard times. The uncompensated labor inputs from neighbors at critical times in the cropping and livestock rearing cycles and during family emergencies or natural disasters were not only necessary for the survival of the family farm, they helped make the midwestern system of family farming as productive as it was.[2] Women were the key actors in maintaining the social relationships upon which the system

depended, while men tended to focus on commercial aspects of farming. Family farmers resisted easy categorization either as capitalist entrepreneurs or as members of the working class. The communal nature of neighborhood labor and its role in production was too important for either category to be apt. Most preferred instead to view themselves as a "class apart."

THE "AGRARIAN MYTH" UNDER DURESS

One of the taproots of American culture has long involved an idealization of rural living and a sentimental attachment to the rural as somehow more "natural" and moral. Richard Hofstadter referred to the complex of notions upon which this attachment and idealization were based as the "agrarian myth." Essentially the myth contended that agriculture was the nation's basic industry--the one upon which all others depended--and that farming was a morally and spiritually superior way of life. The myth maintained that farmers were more independent, self-sufficient, honest, dependable, free, democratic, and devoted to high moral principles. It was an old idea in American history going back at least as far as the writings of Thomas Jefferson.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, as agricultural production lurched through cycles of boom and bust, midwestern cities experienced an industrial and business boom of unprecedented proportions, fueled in part by the migration of millions of people from rural areas of the country. In the decade 1900-10 population losses were registered for the first time even in the richest farming regions during a time of unprecedented agricultural prosperity. If rural life was superior to urban life, why were so many people leaving the farm for the city? The agrarian myth seemed to be contradicted by demographic facts.

What was occurring was a major restructuring of the regional economy including

agriculture. While most farm families remained reliant on the social and economic security net provided by their rural neighborhoods, an increasing number of farmers took up the individuating ideology of the more capital-intensive form of farming proffered by the advocates of "progressive" or scientific agriculture. This led to growing income disparities and an increasing fragmentation of family farmers along new lines of class division. Ironically, few pundits saw any necessary connection between this transformation and increasing rural to urban migration. Instead, they tended to identify the continuing attachment of farm families to their rural neighborhoods as impeding more rapid increases in the material well being of farm families.

Changes were also occurring in the hierarchy of urban places. Before the turn of the century, villages and small towns had been significant retail trade centers and the sites of a considerable amount of small scale manufacturing activity. As such, these were typically places of employment for farm children who either could not, or chose not, to take up farming. However, after the turn of the century, improved transportation, changes in the geography of retailing, and the concentration of manufacturing in the larger cities resulted in economic decline in most villages and small towns of the Midwest.

THE COUNTRY LIFE MOVEMENT AND ANTIMODERNIST MODERNITY

While many Americans welcomed the material advantages wrought by rapid industrialization and urbanization, others worried about whether industrial growth was sustainable both socially and economically or whether it would lead to new and sharper class divisions and class conflict. That an alliance might be forged between farmers and the urban working class, along the lines envisioned by some Populists only a few years earlier, was viewed with particular dread by national leaders. The hegemony of the agrarian myth in the

American consciousness had been an effective antidote to these fears throughout the nineteenth century, but it was not clear that that hegemony would carry into the twentieth. To help ensure that it would, a small but influential cadre of urban elites from agrarian backgrounds coalesced into what became known as the Country Life movement. It became one of the most influential ideological forces gripping intellectual circles during the Progressive Era. In the Midwest, Country Lifers concentrated their efforts on finding a means of bringing the agrarian myth up to date. They sought to do so by convincing farmers that they should abandon their parochialism, particularly that deriving from their excessive attachment to their rural neighborhoods, and start behaving more like small businessmen. The family farmers' love and care for the land that they worked should be preserved, but they should strive for greater efficiency in both their farming and business methods. In this, farmers needed help—help from the agricultural colleges, from state governments, from the new social and economic sciences, from the education profession, and a host of other modern institutions. Country Life reformers saw the neighborhood system of family farming as aberrant and pre-modern, necessarily giving way to progressive farming freed from the strictures of locality and embracing the social relations of urban middle-class modernity reconstituted in a rural context.

Country Life leaders were drawn from three basic groups driven by related, but different, considerations. First was a large group of leading businessmen who realized that the competitive position of U.S. firms in the world economy would be endangered without the continued availability of cheap foodstuffs.[3] Second was a rising cadre of social scientists enamored with conceptions of efficiency and with the possibility of applying social engineering to problems of agricultural production.[4] Third were the leaders of several of the

mainline Protestant denominations who had pioneered the new fields of rural and religious sociology and whose rural congregations had dwindled as rural to urban migration increased. They sought to make their churches more relevant in the practical social and economic matters of concern to rural people.

Despite their apparent heterogeneity, these groups agreed that American agricultural production and the nature of rural life that sustained it were antiquated and in need of modernization. They believed that the region's most "progressive" farmers were being pushed out of the countryside by its economic backwardness and social stagnation with greater force than they were being pulled out by the social and economic attractions of the city. Those who remained were thought to be inattentive to the ways of increasing yields being pioneered in the new agricultural sciences and ill-equipped educationally to take advantage either of them or of the improved business and marketing practices that could make family farming more efficient. The concerns of Country Life leaders, however, ran deeper than this. They felt that the American farm family had not participated in the social and economic progress of the urban-industrial age as fully as had urban residents.

If the new disadvantages of country life seemed clear enough, ways of overcoming them without also destroying its supposed advantages were not. The Country Life Commission recommended a few specific policy initiatives but suggested that more fundamental changes were necessary if the flow of farm youth and the "better class" of farmers to the cities was to be stemmed.[5]

CHURCH, SCHOOL, AND STATE

Initially, Country Lifers placed their confidence in the rural church as the key institution through which to initiate reform. The social gospel movement that had swept the

nation in the two decades bracketing the turn of the century had been successful in recruiting a new breed of Protestant preacher, especially in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Provided he was charismatic and had the appropriate training in rural sociology, this new type of minister could be a powerful instrument of rural reform. Indeed in many places members of the clergy were the only agents of modernity with any influence among farm families. Rural population losses, however, had made it clear to most church leaders that there were far too many rural churches for all of them to viable. Ironically, just when educational reformers were uniting in their call for rural school consolidation, Country Lifers had agreed on the necessity of reducing the numbers of churches through church consolidation. It was in trying to identify a spatial strategy to guide the consolidation of churches that Country Life leaders hit upon the concept of the ***country town.***

Country towns were to be those small towns and villages at the lowest level of the urban hierarchy. They already served as retail centers for a dispersed rural population and as centers for the collection, preliminary processing, and transshipment of farm commodities. Country Lifers claimed that such places with fewer than about 800 people were "rural-minded" in the sense that all or most of their residents had an interest in local agriculture and its continued vitality. Bigger towns were too urban. With the closure of churches located in the countryside and with the unification of their parishes with those of the country-town churches, there would be a re-centering of rural religious life from the rural neighborhood to the country town. If these places seemed to be the ideal sites for consolidating rural religious life, it was only a short step to also see them as appropriate sites for the new kind of rural school that educational reformers had been advocating for some time.

THE CONSOLIDATION METAPHOR

The consolidation metaphor did not originate in either the rural education reform movement or in the Country Life movement. It derived from the consolidation of economic power under the control of a relatively small number of large corporations in America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century--a transformation of the US economy that national leaders saw as instrumental in the rise of the US to world leadership by the turn of the century. But, if the consolidation of corporate power had resulted in economic progress in the cities, then perhaps a different form of consolidation, one re-centering rural life on the country town, could help diffuse more of that progress to rural areas as well. By locating the consolidated church and consolidated school in the country town a new kind place, a new kind of rural consciousness, and a new kind of rural community could be created—one combining the advantages of the both city and country: **It would be 'in town' but 'of the country.'**

While new kinds of both churches and schools were thought necessary, the increasing political support from elites that rural school consolidation was attracting, eventually convinced Country Life leaders that placing the priority on rural school consolidation rather than on rural church consolidation offered the greater promise for producing the desired changes quickly. The consolidated school would improve the educational level of farm children, better preparing them to assume the urban-industrial jobs that many of them would have to fill as the number of farmers dwindled. It would introduce the methods of scientific agriculture, modern business practices, and home economics to the next generation of farmers, thereby not only enhancing agricultural productivity but also improving the quality of farm life. It would help revitalize other rural institutions, including the rural church, now

also suitably relocated in or consolidated with those of the country towns. But, most importantly, the school, unlike the church, was a state institution, sanctioned by law and funded by compulsory taxation. In short, it seemed to be a key institution in the re-engineering of country life--not in preserving the traditional agrarian myth, but recreating it in a more modern form. While Protestant church leaders and the leaders of rural school reform could not officially join forces in any state-led effort to consolidate rural schools because of the constitutional separation of church and state in the U.S., they could and did do so informally with increasing frequency in the second decade of the twentieth century. I'll return to this point in a few minutes. But, first I should make explicit what was only implicit in the ideology of the Country Life movement.

Although the Catholic Church in theUnited States would eventually develop its version of the Country Life movement, the country town was to be a non-ethnic, Protestant place—a fact that was not lost on most Catholics and many Lutherans in the Midwest. Each of these churches had well-established traditions of maintaining parochial schools whenever concentrations of adherents made that possible. To most Catholics and many Lutherans, rural school consolidation appeared to be an alternative means of coercing rural German-American and Catholic schoolchildren into attending public schools, especially the public high school, rather than attending parochial school, thereby destroying the viability of parochial education and undermining ethnic communities. Although this may not have been one of the intended consequences of rural school consolidation, it was one of its effects.

THE SOLUTION

From 1910 onward, educational reformers joined forces with the Country Lifers and combined their considerable rhetorical and political skills to form a relatively cohesive social

movement. For a time, they jointly succeeded in creating a powerful discourse in support of rural school consolidation--one in which consolidation appeared to be *the* solution to a host of country life problems. Professional educators still saw school consolidation as a means of improving the quality of elementary educational opportunities available to children in rural areas and for expanding the reach of the public high school into the countryside, but they needed support at the grass roots if there was to be any hope of implementing it.

The State of Iowa played a pivotal role in that movement and in institutionalizing consolidation as the dominant discourse in rural education circles for the remainder of the century. It was in Iowa that the newly established Department of Public Instruction, the state's educational leaders, and community activists affiliated with the Country Life movement conducted the nation's first fully coordinated campaign to consolidate a state's rural school districts and subdistricts. Iowa was to be the model for other states to follow. From 1912 to 1921, Iowa was the center of national attention as state and local leaders attempted to implement their preferred variant of rural school consolidation--one which replaced the myriad one-room country schools with a much smaller number of new 'consolidated' schools containing both elementary grades and four years of high school located in villages and small towns and occasionally in the open country.[6] Small-town businessmen and Methodist ministers were the principle local leaders backing consolidation. Both of these groups found the ideology of the country town compatible with their own visions of social progress.

RESISTANCE AND TEMPORARY FAILURE

Iowa's first consolidation movement obtained support primarily in those localities where it was least needed—in the wealthiest sections of the state where a more capital-

intensive form of agriculture was already dominant. In most places, the movement provoked some of the most intense forms of community conflict ever to occur in the state and was rejected. The movement failed both as an educational innovation and as the institutional means of creating the new forms of rural community hoped for by Country Lifers. Most rural Iowans were unwilling to trade the viability of their rural neighborhoods for the possibly greater educational benefits of school consolidation. The loss of a country school ensured the demise of the rural neighborhood; consolidation simply delivered education in a different, not necessarily better, manner.

In my book I present a detailed case study of Buck Creek in Delaware County that helps in clarifying why the movement failed. It focuses on the building of a new rural community of the sort envisioned by the leaders of the Country Life movement. The community-building effort at Buck Creek was initiated by a local Country Life activist, a Methodist minister, but once it became clear that the project also entailed rural school consolidation, a lengthy debate ensued over the nature of the rural community that was being constructed and the roles of the church and the school in its creation and reproduction. While that debate had some unique elements, variants of it occurred in practically every rural community in the state during the period in question.[7] Members of the Buck Creek Church succeeded in the getting their consolidated school, but at a cost! Gone was the rural neighborhood as a place where, irrespective of religion, neighbor was linked to neighbor by bonds of reciprocity, mutuality, and propinquity. Gone also were most of the Catholic families that had previously farmed in the area. A modified neighborhood system of family farming continued to operate for the Methodists in the area, as the Buck Creek Church assumed institutional responsibility for fulfilling needs that had previously rested with the

rural neighborhood.

State leaders of this early consolidation movement in Iowa, in their desire to implement what they saw as a necessary educational reform, encouraged local supporters of consolidation to exploit visions of community and place that were as reactionary as they appeared progressive. As it was implemented locally, consolidation fostered feelings of social superiority, difference, and exclusion, exploiting whatever implicit social differences between rural people that were already at hand--religion, ethnicity, and class. The goals of achieving educational equality between town and country or enhancing the educational opportunities of farm children were lost in the shuffle of building of new kinds of community based on the country town.

Of the more than 13,000 country schools that had existed in 1912, only 2,663 were closed through consolidation. Most rural people in Iowa, rejected rural school consolidation in the period 1912-1921, not because they thought it was necessarily poor educational policy, but because they thought it would result in the rural school becoming a separate kind of place, detached and disarticulated from the community of which they thought it should be a part or attached to a new form of community in which they were unequal, or even unwanted, members.

Although the movement failed in most localities, a significant component of its discourse--that the education provided in the small, rural school was necessarily inferior to that provided in urban schools—won. Rather than send their children to a high school in one of the new consolidated schools far more parents preferred to send their children to one of the better high schools in a larger town or city under the state's free-tuition law. When consolidation became a political dead letter after 1922, the Department of Public Instruction

concentrated its efforts on standardizing the remaining country schools. This had the effect of stifling innovation in rural education altogether. The new educational establishment had become a prisoner of its own discourse: **consolidation was the solution to the rural school problem and sooner or later enough people would realize this for the consolidation movement to begin anew**.

Iowa's second incarnation of consolidation—that beginning in the late 1950's, but still ongoing—did not fully repeat the mistakes of the earlier movement. But, it overreacted to the issues of community that had so dominated debate in the earlier movement and sought to separate schools, especially high schools, from any place-based conception of community altogether. Ironically, by the standards embraced by a new cadre of educational reformers, all but a handful of the consolidated schools established earlier in the century were deemed too small to be efficient. They were among the first to be recommended for re-consolidation—now dubbed reorganization. The term *community* was retained in naming the reorganized districts, but all other pretenses regarding the creation of new communities were abandoned.

LESSONS

What is the relevance of this for creating educational programs more responsive to the needs of all students in rural areas, and especially gifted students? Frankly, you are better positioned than I for determining this. But, I do wish to leave you with this admonition: To obtain the necessary public support and to be successful educationally, programs in gifted education can and should help forge a re-connection between the schools in rural areas and the place-based communities comprising the districts they serve. Gifted students are among the greatest resources that rural communities have. Establish programs that develop the

talents of these students as fully as possible, but remember to provide opportunities for their gifts to be exercised locally in ways that integrate gifted students into their home communities. In doing so, consider what the relationship should be between the rural communities and the larger society and how this should find expression in the school. Rural communities typically consist of dense, but still intelligible, networks of social and economic relations within which peoples daily lives unfold. Shouldn't the public school seek to instill an appreciation of how local communities are embedded in a class-structured society and give it texture and meaning? Even in the age of telecommunications, the concept of the school as an important place where people learn about themselves in relation to their community, to others, and to the structure of society retains it relevance. In seeking ways of serving students with diverse gifts and abilities, re-think what kind of place the rural school is and what kind of place it could become.

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1. The path-breaking work of John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie*, explodes as myth the view that stable communities failed to develop in the early Midwest. Mary Neth in *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundation of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* makes the case that the neighborhood-based social relationships Faragher identified in the nineteenth century in central Illinois remained key attributes of commercial family farming throughout much of the rural Midwest until the beginning of World War II.

2. This is consistent with the argument Max Pfeffer makes regarding the growth of family farming in the Great Plains. See Pfeffer, "Social Origins of Three Systems of Farm Production in the United States."

3. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution*, 36-37,

4. See Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement 1890-1920*; Samuel P. Hays, *Businessmen and Reform: A Study of the Progressive Movement*; and Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order*, 1877-1920.

5. Danbom, *The Resisted Revolution*, 44 and *Born in the Country*, 169-175; and D.J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*, 134-135.

6. More than 1,000 villages with populations below 800 were identified as the "natural centers" for consolidated schools--as the new "country towns" that Country Life reformers hoped could be engineered through consolidation (F. A. Welch, "Some Problems of the Village School," *Midland Schools* 35:5 (1921): 147-148; Macy Campbell, "A Brief History of Consolidation in Iowa," *Bulletin of the Iowa State Teachers' College*, Department of Rural Education, 22:3 (1921): 3-16).

7. For a more complete historiography of the rural school consolidation movement in Iowa, see Reynolds, *There Goes the Neighborhood.*

END

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